CHAPTER 8

The Myths of Manifest Destiny

When John O'Sullivan coined the felicitous phrase “manifest destiny” in mid-1845, he provided Americans then and since with an invaluable legitimizing myth of empire. During the final phase of the Texas annexation crisis, he accused the European nations of “hostile interference” in American affairs, “for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” In his justification for American expansion, O'Sullivan reconciled democracy with empire while he implicitly sanctioned the dispossession of all non-Anglo peoples on the continent. During the mid-1840s, he repeatedly stressed that the United States must acquire abundant land for “the free development” of its “yearly multiplying millions”; without territorial expansion the novel experiment in free government and free enterprise might collapse.  

1. “Annexion,” Democratic Review, 17 (July, 1845):5. O'Sullivan repeatedly absolved the United States of blame for the removal of Indians or the dispossession of Mexicans. Ironically, though, O'Sullivan’s original concept of manifest destiny differs significantly from the way in which it has been used to describe the expansion to the Pacific. In his article coining the phrase manifest destiny, O'Sullivan predicted that pioneers would acquire the entire continent for the United States peacefully by settling in remote regions (including Oregon and California), forming their own autonomous governments, and then seeking annexation to the United States. Texas served as his prototype for this unique method of empire building in North America. In 1846, however, O'Sullivan abandoned his gradualism and supported Polk’s strategy for wrestling the borderlands from Mexico.
The recurring emphasis on material factors in the Democrats’ speculations about the need for expansion raises some important questions about the purported idealism of both “Jacksonian Democracy” and manifest destiny. To O’Sullivan and other Democrats, previous territorial acquisitions had been indispensable to the success of the American political and economic system. And though the Jacksonians were convinced of the superiority of popular government, they were much less certain about its viability. Their ambitions for a continental empire represented much more than simple romantic nationalism: they demanded land because they regarded it as the primary prerequisite for republican government and for an economy and society based upon individual acquisitiveness, geographical and social mobility, and a fluid class structure. These beliefs—best expressed by O’Sullivan but articulated by other Democrats as well—were crucial to most Jacksonian policies, especially those promoting territorial and commercial expansion. To consider manifest destiny in the context of such principles of political economy is a way of making more comprehensible the sustained drive for empire in the 1840s.

Misconceptions about manifest destiny still influence Americans’ impressions about their nation’s history. Although the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam War have led many Americans to question several of the prevailing orthodoxies of United States history, popular attitudes about the country’s past—the self-concept of Americans and their definition of their nation’s role in world affairs—have shown a remarkable resiliency, despite the challenges of revisionist scholars. Prevailing ideas about westward expansion are inextricably linked to the values associated with American exceptionalism and mission, fundamental components of the Jacksonian creed. The persistence of manifest destiny ideology under radically different political, economic, and military realities since the 1840s attests to the significant impact these legitimizing myths of empire have had on popular beliefs about United States history. Since continental expansion gave birth to and nurtured so many nationalistic myths, a reevaluation of the historical circumstances that spawned them is an essential exercise in the reassessment of the American past.

Complicating any separation of historical myth from historical actuality is the confusion surrounding the concept of territorial expansion as a policy implemented by national leaders and the concept of the frontier experience as a spontaneous process initiated by pioneers. Long before Frederick Jackson Turner began studying the
evolution of a frontier area from “savagery” to “civilization,” Americans speculated about the significance of westward expansion upon their institutions and character as well as about its effects upon the world at large. In their own minds, Americans believed that their progress provided a beacon light to a world in darkness. Moreover, though the ever-expanding frontier represented a process quintessentially American, it was also a process with ramifications for people across the Atlantic. From the very beginning of British settlement in North America, the expanding frontier and its pioneer inhabitants were as influential in historical development as were the seat of empire and its imperial officials. This preoccupation with the frontier and its impact on American character and destiny became even more pronounced after the Revolution, then reached new heights during the Jacksonian era. Images of mountain men, freedom fighters at the Alamo, wagon caravans, and prospectors rushing to California appeal more to romantic sensibilities than Calhoun’s dispatches, Walker’s propaganda, or Polk’s devious manipulations to gain title to the Spanish borderlands. The frontiersmen deserve the pages of print that have been devoted to them, though theirs is but half the story. The epic quality of the pioneers’ adventures lends sanctity to American expansion and obscures the actual dynamics of empire building. Pioneers alone did not take possession of the continent, nor did policy makers alone acquire it. Two complementary assaults by national leaders and individual pioneers achieved a continental empire during the mid-1840s.

Jacksonians exalted the pioneer as the epitome of the common man, and they celebrated American expansion as an integral part of their mission to obtain a better nation and a better world based on individual freedom, liberalized international trade, and peaceful coexistence. The Democrats equated American progress with global progress and repeatedly argued that European oligarchs were actually opposing the interests of their own people by trying to discourage the expansion of the United States. Geographically and ideologically separated from Europe, the United States, under Jacksonian direction, tried to improve its democratic institutions, utilize the land’s rich resources, and demonstrate to the world the superiority of a system allowing free men to compete in a dynamic society. Consequently, the impact of the pioneering process transcended the concerns of the frontiersmen. In forming “a more perfect union” on a continually expanding frontier, Americans thought that they were actually serving the cause of all mankind.
Such a melding of exceptionalism and empire permitted the Jacksonians the luxury of righteous denunciation of their critics at home and abroad. Their domestic foes could be paired with European monarchs as spokesmen for an old order of aristocracy, privilege, and proscription; American expansionism and the Jacksonian domestic program, on the other hand, represented the antithesis of traditional systems. Since territorial acquisitions and Democratic policies fostered opportunity and democracy, they liberated men from oppressive social and economic relationships. The Jacksonians’ program promised so much for so little; no wonder messianic imagery appeared so frequently in their rhetoric.

Skeptical Whigs often challenged the Democrats’ sincerity, however, sensing that the Jacksonians’ motives for aggrandizement were more selfish than they usually admitted. The Democrats’ rhetoric proved more resilient than the Whigs’ trenchant criticisms of “manifest destiny,” however, and so subsequent generations of Americans have underestimated the extent and the intensity of opposition to the policies behind expansionism in the 1840s, especially the Mexican War. Enduring misconceptions about the period have not only obscured the complexities of territorial and commercial expansion during the late Jacksonian era; they have also contributed to an erroneous impression of American history during the entire century from the close of the War of 1812 to the entry of the United States into World War I. A reassessment of these misconceptions shows a greater continuity between nineteenth- and twentieth-century foreign policy than is customarily supposed. The myths of manifest destiny perpetuate an unwarranted nostalgia for times past and conceal some of the striking similarities between the past and the present. The splendid half-century of American isolation and expansion had a darker side, too.

Since the advent of the atomic age, many historians have looked wistfully back to the nineteenth century as a simpler, more secure, and more innocent era in American history. During the national

2. Congressman William Duer of New York, for example, protested in early 1848: “Away with this wretched cant! ... Away with this mawkish morality, with this desecration of religion, with this cant about ‘manifest destiny,’ a divine mission, a warrant from the Most High, to civilize, christianize, and democratize our sister republic at the mouth of the cannon!” (Congressional Globe [hereafter abbreviated CG], 30 Cong., 1 sess., 347 [February 14, 1848]). James Russell Lowell thought that “all this big talk of our destinies” was “half of it igno[ra]nce, an’ t’ other half rum” (The Complete Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell, Cambridge ed. [Boston, 1896], p. 189).
debate on the purported missile gap in 1960, for example, C. Vann Woodward observed that “throughout most of its history the United States has enjoyed a remarkable degree of military security, physical security from hostile attack and invasion. This security was not only remarkably effective, but it was relatively free.” Woodward and many of his contemporaries stressed discontinuity in the relative security of the United States before and after its rise to world power. Before the twentieth century, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, a weak Mexico and Canada, and European distractions that diverted attention from American affairs gave the United States peace without onerous military expenditures, complicated diplomacy, or devastating wars. But free security disappeared with the quantum leaps in weapons technology in the twentieth century. No longer could the United States repose in the comforting knowledge that its sphere was insulated from the vicissitudes of the shrinking globe.3

For most historians who wrote during the two decades following the Second World War, American security in the nineteenth century had not only been free; it had been innocent as well. Samuel Flagg Bemis observed in 1965 that “American expansion across a practically empty continent despoiled no nation unjustly.” Whereas European empires had exploited and oppressed their colonial subjects, the United States had adhered to nonintervention, free trade, amicable diplomacy, and self-determination for all peoples. American leaders between the War of 1812 and the Spanish-American War based their foreign policy on what Bemis labeled the “two pole-stars” of United States foreign relations, “anti-imperialism and isolation.” Noted diplomat and scholar George F. Kennan likewise viewed the nineteenth century as an era of detachment and naive innocence in American affairs. Kennan believed that American leaders during this period failed to recognize “the global framework” that buttressed the security of the United States. According to Kennan and others troubled by the exigencies of global conflict in their time, the United States during most of the nineteenth century had experienced the rare blessings of isolation and effortless security, an insularity and immunity from international strife that enabled Americans to devote virtually all their attention to domestic development. Spared from the wiles of

European statecraft and war during much of its history, the United States seemed to Kennan ill prepared to deal with the new age of superpowers and superweapons after 1945.4

American history books, including diplomatic history texts, reinforce the idea that the United States became concerned with considerations of national security only in the twentieth century. Historians of foreign relations usually cover the century from the winning of independence to the outward thrust of the 1890s only cursorily. After the American Revolution little of major importance is said to have occurred in American diplomacy except the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine: the United States had seemed to lack anything resembling a foreign policy during that century of dramatic internal growth. Because 1898 represents for many scholars a sharp transition in the national experience, earlier continental expansion appears irrelevant to the global power politics of the twentieth century. The acquisition of Hawaii and the Philippines in 1898, for example, has received far more careful study than the annexation of Texas in 1845. Such neglect of the first century of American diplomacy and such inordinate emphasis on the period since the Spanish-American War conveys the impression that continental expansion was a foregone conclusion, a long but somewhat uneventful rehearsal for the emergence of the United States as a world power in the twentieth century.5

Scholarly journals and monographs in American foreign relations repeat this pattern. An overwhelming proportion of recent articles and books on American diplomacy cover the period since World War I. By its virtual absence in both scholarly and popular publications, the pre-1898 era is rendered irrelevant by default, a mere antecedent to the more exciting and more perilous twentieth century. Scholars of American foreign relations have not carefully reexamined the territorial expansion of the United States in the late Jacksonian era and its relative importance in American history, though the fact that the United States doubled its domain in only three short years and fought its first sustained foreign war during the same period suggests that the period deserves some reconsideration.6

6. Recently a few scholars have pointed out the neglect of the pre-Wilsonian period
The expansionism of the 1840s acquires a new significance, however, when it is considered within the context of the cultural, social, and political factors that motivated the Jacksonians to pursue a continental empire. In promoting the acquisition of new lands and new markets, the Democrats greatly exaggerated the extent of European hostility to the United States and refused to admit the duplicity and brutality behind their own efforts to expand their nation's territory and trade. By joining their concepts of exceptionalism and empire, the expansionists found a rationale for denying to all other nations and peoples, whether strong or weak, any right to any portion of the entire North American continent. If a rival was strong, it posed a threat to American security and had to be removed; if a rival was weak, it proved its inferiority and lent sanction to whatever actions were taken by pioneers or policy makers to make the territory a part of the United States.

The confusion surrounding expansion results in part from the ambivalence of the Jacksonians themselves, who demonstrated both compassion and contempt in their policies, depending on the racial and ethnic identities of the peoples to be affected by Democratic measures. Generous and humane toward impoverished Americans and poor immigrants from Europe, the Democrats showed far less concern for nonwhites whom they dispossessed or exploited in the process of westward expansion and national development. Removal, eclipse, or extermination—not acculturation and assimilation—awaited the Indians, blacks, and mixed-blood Mexicans on the continent. Despite occasional statements to the contrary, the expansionists regarded the incorporation of nonwhite peoples into the country as both unlikely and undesirable. Without hint of hypocrisy the Jacksonians sought lenient naturalization laws and opportunities for newcomers while strenuously defending policies to separate Indians and Mexicans from their lands and programs to relocate blacks to Africa and Central America.

When expansionists did express concern for nonwhites, they did not question the basic assumptions behind racial proscription and dispossession. They trusted masters to treat their slaves humanely; they urged that the federal government compensate Indians adequately for their territorial cessions. Few expansionists, however,
could see any alternative to the removal or extermination of Indians or the enslavement or proscription of blacks. Indians had no legitimate claim to land; blacks no legitimate claim to freedom. Even Free-Soilers who opposed the extension of slavery had little sympathy for the slave, arguing, in essence, that black freedom was detrimental to white status. The racism in Washington was matched by racism on the frontier: pioneers in both Oregon and California adopted restrictive measures in the late 1840s to discourage or prohibit the migration of free blacks to the far West.

The expansion to the Pacific was not primarily an expression of American confidence. Anxiety, not optimism, generally lay behind the quest for land, ports, and markets. A powerful combination of fears led the neo-Jeffersonians of the 1840s to embrace territorial and commercial expansionism as the best means of warding off both domestic and foreign threats to the United States. The Jacksonians were proponents of laissez-faire only in a limited sense, and their sustained efforts to acquire land and markets were their equivalents for what they saw as the Whigs’ dangerous propensity to meddle in the domestic economy. Rather than give an “artificial” stimulus to the economy through protective duties or privileged charters, the Democrats preferred to assist American producers by means of territorial acquisitions, reciprocity treaties, improvements in the navy, and a liberal land policy. Frightened by rapid modernization in the United States, the Democrats warned that both European monarchs and the Whig opposition were threatening the Republic—the Europeans by their attempts to contain American expansion, the Whigs by their resistance to Jacksonian foreign policy and their support of legislation that would hasten industrialization, urbanization, and class polarization in the United States.

Jeffersonian ideology, especially its romantic agrarianism, its fear of industrialization, and its conviction that the United States had a natural right to free trade, contributed significantly to the ideology of manifest destiny. To the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians, American farms raised good republican citizens as well as corn, cotton, and wheat: cultivated fields produced virtuous, cultivated people. Whatever the realities of the late Jacksonian period, the expansionists insisted that agricultural societies fostered opportunity and political equality, the essential features of American uniqueness. Moreover, the neo-Jeffersonians contended that only industrial nations became international predators; agricultural countries were self-contained and did not need colonies or privileged markets. These misconceptions cloak
some of the more unflattering aspects of antebellum economy and society: slavemasters, not sturdy yeomen, dominated the social and political life of the South; the country’s most important export crops, cotton and tobacco, were produced by forced labor; Indians were cruelly dispossessed of their lands and often their culture to make room for American producers; “go-ahead” Americans frequently seemed more interested in land speculation schemes than in patient tilling of the soil; and the United States, like other empires, did prey upon other peoples and nations to augment its wealth, power, and security.

The fact that the United States acquired contiguous rather than noncontiguous territory makes American aggrandizement no less imperial than that of other empires of the mid-nineteenth century. The United States enjoyed several advantages that facilitated its enlargement and made it more antiseptic. Mexico’s weakness, the inability of Indian tribes to unite and resist dispossession, the decline of France and Spain as colonizing powers in the New World, and geographical isolation from Europe all served the interests of the United States as it spread across the continent. In addition, the preference for an anticolonial empire embodied in the concept of a confederated Union also contributed to American success. But many Democrats wanted to venture beyond the continent, and had the party not become so divided during and after the Mexican War, the Polk administration probably would have taken steps to add Yucatán and Cuba to the United States, thereby extending the empire into the Caribbean.

The urge to expand beyond the continent was diminished by the fact that the continent itself was incredibly rich in resources. Those abundant resources provided the basis for unparalleled economic growth at home and power in relations with countries abroad. The expansionists regarded the nation’s productivity as an irresistible weapon that could counterbalance the military strength of Europe. Here, again, an old Jeffersonian perception dating back to the 1790s came into play: the world desperately needed American commerce and would sacrifice a great deal to obtain it. Although the expansionists never had cause to drive the masses of Europe to starvation and revolution through an embargo on grain and cotton, their speculations on the subject showed them to be far more imperial than philanthropic in their attitudes toward their nation’s wealth.

Distressed by many trends in American life, the Democrats formu-
lated their domestic and foreign policies to safeguard themselves and their progeny from a potentially dismal future. They hoped to prevent domestic disturbances by acquiring additional territory and markets. Other measures were also devised to protect the country from various perils: the Democrats discouraged the growth of manufacturing and monopolistic banking; attempted to minimize the conflict over slavery, encouraged the sale and settlement of the national domain, and tried to discredit the efforts of dissidents to form third parties that might jeopardize the two-party system.

During the 1840s, then, national security was not “free,” nor was it attained without constant effort. The expansionists utilized propaganda, personal vendetta, legislative legerdemain, confidential agents, covert military pressure, and offensive war to achieve their goals. The Jacksonians, in fact, felt as insecure in their world as their heirs felt in the 1940s, when the Soviet threat called forth a policy of ambitious containment. The insecurity of the 1840s prompted attempts to enlarge the United States; the insecurity of the Cold War prompted policies to hem in the Soviet Union. In both cases, anxiety was a major factor behind American actions.

Another myth of manifest destiny concerns the role of military power in American expansion. On May 11, 1846, President Polk informed Congress that “after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.” War had begun, Polk observed, in spite of “all our efforts to avoid it.” Much evidence, however, raises doubts about just how hard Polk tried to prevent war. Six weeks before Polk’s war message, for example, Captain William S. Henry, a subordinate commander in Taylor’s army en route to the city of Matamoros, noted in his journal, “Our situation is truly extraordinary: right in the enemy’s country (to all appearance), actually occupying their corn and cotton fields, the people of the soil leaving their homes, and we, with a small handful of men, marching with colors flying and drums beating, right under the very guns of one of

7. James D. Richardson, ed., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 10 vols. (New York, 1897), 5:2292. Senator John Davis of Massachusetts immediately pointed out the inescapable inconsistency in Polk’s message: “We are told in that document that the blood of American citizens has been spilt on our soil. This may be so. It may be true. But in the same message we are told that there is a question of boundary between us and Mexico, and an unsettled question; and that the Minister [Slidell] was sent there from here for the purpose of negotiating that very question” (CG, 29 Cong., 1 sess., 786 [May 11, 1846]).
their principal cities, displaying the star-spangled banner, as if in
defiance, under their very nose.”8 This army’s purpose was not limit-
eted to the defense of Texas. It is true that the United States claimed
the Rio Grande as the border; it is also true that the United States,
in the person of James K. Polk, claimed that the nation had a “clear
and unquestionable” title to Oregon up to 54° 40’. But the issue for
the Polk administration was not the validity of various boundary
claims, but rather the issue of whether military pressure could force
Mexico to relinquish the disputed territory between the Nueces and
Rio Grande, and the undisputed territories of New Mexico and Cali-
ifornia besides. The Democrats chose war to defend an unclear and
questionable title in the Southwest but retreated from a supposedly
clear and unquestionable title in the Northwest. The hypocrisy did
not escape the Whigs.9

The war promised other benefits as well. Slidell encouraged the
Polk administration to prosecute the war with vigor. “The navy should
have an opportunity to distinguish itself,” Slidell counseled after
Taylor’s army had already won its laurels. “The people must have
something to huzza about.”10 Americans rushed by the thousands to
fight in Mexico, and several congressmen begged Polk for commis-
sions to command them. The bloodshed elevated to prominence the
next two elected presidents, Taylor and Pierce, as well as the future
president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis. In Senator Benton’s
words, “gunpowder popularity” often served as “the passport to the
presidency” at this time.11 Benton himself urged Polk to name him
supreme commander in Mexico: the precedent of Jackson’s meteoric
rise to eminence through the killing of redcoats and redskins was not
lost on ambitious Democrats. Benton did not become supreme com-

70. Congressman Solomon Foot of Vermont told the House of Representatives on
July 16, “The President might have said with more propriety that the United States
had passed the boundary of Mexico and invaded her territory. This territory had
always been in her exclusive possession. She had her military posts there, she had
her custom-house and collectors there, she had her resident citizens there, and these
citizens were represented in the Mexican Congress” *(CG, 29 Cong., 1 sess., App. 1100
[July 16, 1846]).

9. Polk, Congressman Joshua Bell of Kentucky noted, had yielded half of Oregon
to Britain but had pushed Mexico to war over the Texas boundary. “This, to some
extent,” he observed, “looks like cringing to the strong and oppressing the weak”
*(CG, 29 Cong., 2 sess., App. 249 [January 19, 1847]).


11. *Thirty Years’ View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty
mander and he never attained the presidency. To Polk’s chagrin, the war’s two most celebrated generals, Taylor and Winfield Scott, turned out to be Whigs. Contrary to the Democrats’ expectations, the war did not help their party at the polls.

In contrast to the turmoil of the 1850s and the ordeal of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the 1840s appear in history books as years of stunning success. Within a thousand days the United States acquired its continental empire, adding vast territories at an unprecedented rate. After World War II, several historians who studied westward expansion depicted the 1840s as a golden age in American diplomacy, a time when enlightened self-interest and adequate power and resolve to attain it guided United States foreign policy. Norman Graebner so assessed the decade, contending in 1955 that expansion to the Pacific “was a unified, purposeful, precise movement that was ever limited to specific maritime objectives... It was... through clearly conceived policies relentlessly pursued that the United States achieved its empire on the Pacific,” he concluded. Another prominent postwar scholar, Arthur M. Schlesinger, described Polk as “undeservedly one of the forgotten men of American history.” Polk declared “certain definite objectives” for his term and achieved them all: a reduced tariff, an Independent Treasury, and the acquisition of Oregon and California. “By carrying the flag to the Pacific he gave America her continental breadth and ensured her future significance in the world,” Schlesinger noted. Many postwar scholars who had witnessed the rise and fall of fascism only to face another menace in Cold War communism understandably assessed manifest destiny chiefly in terms of how the acquisitions had increased the wealth and power of the United States, equipping it to counter totalitarian regimes a century later. This perspective enhanced the reputations of the expansionists.12

12. Norman A. Graebner, Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion (New York, 1955), pp. vi, 228; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Paths to the Present (New York, 1949), pp. 97–98. Up until the late 1940s, the “Whiggish” view of late Jacksonian expansion generally prevailed. That view held that Tyler and Polk had been proslavery sectionalists who had subverted the Constitution and despoiled Mexico in order to gain additional slave territory. During the height of the Cold War, however, many scholars tended to interpret expansion in terms of how powerful (and how great a force for good) territorial acquisitions had made the United States. Since the Civil Rights movement, the interventions abroad in the 1960s, and the Vietnam War, another generation of scholars have increasingly seen the policies of the 1840s as striking manifestations of a recurring arrogance of power in American relations with nonwhite peoples in weaker nations.
The Cold War view of manifest destiny is instructive not only for what it asserts but also for what it neglects or ignores. American policy makers in the 1840s did define the national interest in terms of acquiring land and markets, and they did find various ways to attain their ambitions. In fact, rarely have two presidents acted as audaciously as Tyler and Polk to overcome foreign and domestic opposition to their policies. The cavalier methods of the expansionists during the mid-1840s often appalled contemporaries such as the poet Emerson. "The name of Washington City in the newspapers is every day a blacker shade," he lamented in 1847, "all the news from that quarter being of a sadder type, more malignant. It seems to be settled that no act of honour or benevolence or justice is to be expected from the American government, but only this, that they will be as wicked as they dare."¹³ Cold War scholars, however, were often no more squeamish about the methods of aggrandizement than the expansionists themselves had been. Unlike Emerson and the anti-war Whigs, they seemed to accept the idea that the end justified the means.

A more detached analysis of the history of the 1840s—one less influenced by Cold War assumptions about the positive effects of nineteenth-century expansion—demonstrates how high a price was paid for the acquisitions. The expansionists' shortcomings and mistakes were as historically significant as their much touted strengths and accomplishments, for even when they attained their immediate goal, it seldom lived up to their long-term expectations. They acquired a continental empire but could not govern it. Too certain that their political institutions could resolve fundamental internal divisions and too complacent about the mounting sectional rancor over the expansion of slavery, the Democrats failed to integrate the new acquisitions into the Union and failed to keep the Union itself intact. No triumphs of technology—no quantity of railroads, steamships, telegraphs, and rotary presses—could sustain the expansive confederation. Limitations on expansion did exist, though the Democrats seemed incapable of discerning them during the 1840s. Their perceptions of the past and their fears for the future blinded them to perils in the realignment of sections and politics.

The expansionists' far-fetched notions about nonwhites precluded their thinking constructively about racial questions. By denying the likelihood of a permanent black and Indian population on the conti-

nent, antebellum Americans had difficulty preparing themselves and
their descendants for racial heterogeneity in the United States. The
acceptance of racial diversity as a reality of national life came largely
through necessity, not choice. As most European visitors realized,
racial prejudice permeated the country and transcended the sectional
dispute over slavery. Americans, however, hardly seemed to question
the intense racial animus across the nation; it was such a common-
place of life that it drew only isolated comment or criticism. There
were many gradations of racial feeling among Americans, of course,
and a small corps of radical abolitionists indicted the North for its
failure to practice racial egalitarianism in the free states. But there is
no denying that racial prejudice was a basic determinant of American
domestic and foreign policy during the Jacksonian period.

The expansionists’ ethnocentrism also sowed the seeds of future
discord between the United States and the peoples of Latin America.
The annexation of Texas and the Mexican War created a legacy of
suspicion and anger toward the United States among peoples south
of the Rio Grande. However much the United States professed to be
a “good neighbor” to other countries in the hemisphere, those coun-
tries often held more ambivalent views. This tension has complicated
United States relations with Latin America for well over a century and
persists to the present. During much of its history the United States
has reserved its diplomacy for European countries. Usually a distinct
lack of diplomacy has characterized relations with Indians, Asians,
and Latin Americans.

American arrogance was not confined to the Western Hemisphere.
The swashbuckling demeanor with which Caleb Cushing and his crew
confronted the Chinese in 1844 demonstrated that Americans were,
much like the British, self-interested, presumptuous, and bound to
create problems for the unreceptive and understandably frightened
Chinese. Americans stressed their uniqueness and benevolence, but
the Chinese tended to see greater similarities than differences be-
tween the various Western intruders. The persistent pattern of Amer-
ican condescension toward nonwhite peoples has made it difficult for
twentieth-century leaders to adapt to the challenges of a shrinking
globe and the recent dispersion of wealth and power away from
Europe and America toward East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.
In their zeal to bring “the American way of life” to other peoples,
several generations of United States policy makers have overlooked
the fact that racism, aggressiveness, and self-righteousness have often
been part of that way of life. The paradox of American benevolence
coupled with awesome military power found expression more than a century before the United States intervened in Vietnam. During the Mexican War, for example, James Russell Lowell lampooned American pretensions in his "Pious Editor's Creed":

I du believe wut-ever trash
'Il keep the people in blindness,
Thet we the Mexicuns can thrash
Right inter brotherly kindness,
Thet bombshells, grape, an' powder 'n' ball
Air good-will's strongest magnets,
Thet peace, to make it stick at all,
Must be druv in with bagnets.\(^{14}\)

Bayonet diplomacy (or "big stick" diplomacy) did not originate with Theodore Roosevelt and his interventionism in Latin America. Though not usually so described, the war against Mexico was the first instance of gunboat diplomacy. When a writer for the Democratic Review justified the invasion and occupation of Mexico in 1847, for example, he anticipated Roosevelt's 1904 corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. "It is an acknowledged law of nations," the Review writer maintained, "that when a country sinks into a state of anarchy, unable to govern itself, and dangerous to its neighbors, it becomes the duty of the most powerful of those neighbors to interfere and settle its affairs."\(^{15}\) Acting upon such assumptions, the United States has been doing its "duty" in Latin America for almost 140 years.

In many respects the expansionists' outlook turned out to be strikingly unrealistic. The United States was hardly overcrowded in the early 1840s: millions of acres within the existing national domain remained to be occupied and cultivated. Racial fears were also exag-

15. "The War," Democratic Review, 20 (February, 1847):101. The similarity between this view and Roosevelt's later statement says a great deal about the continuity in American perceptions of and policies toward Latin America. In his annual message of 1904, Roosevelt explained his meddling in Latin America: "Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of ties of civilized societies, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power." Roosevelt intervened in Latin America as "reluctantly" as Polk did in Mexico.
gerated. When southern slaves attained their freedom in 1865, no war between blacks and whites ensued. After the Civil War, scores of large cities and hundreds of factories and corporations spread across the country, yet democratic institutions and capitalism survived the transformation. Despite the undeniable hardships and radical adjustments precipitated by rapid industrialization, few Americans would argue that manufacturing weakened rather than strengthened the United States. The Democrats also overestimated the hostility of Britain. The British ministry acquiesced in the annexation of Texas; it did not incite Mexico to make war upon the United States; and it did not try to acquire California before the United States seized it in 1846. Several major premises behind the expansion of the late Jacksonian period proved erroneous.

The decade of the 1840s should be placed in a different historical context: United States policy in this crucial decade prepared the way for both late-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century imperialism. The expansion of the Tyler-Polk years, like that of the 1890s, grew largely out of a recurring domestic malaise that found expression in American aggrandizement. During both decades, ambitious and anxious policy makers welcomed war and expansion as alternatives to basic structural changes in American economics and politics. The methods of American foreign policy also suggest continuities over time. The tactics employed by Tyler and Polk to expand the empire suggest that the label "imperial presidency" should not be confined to presidents of the Cold War era: Polk, especially, acted as imperially as any of his twentieth-century successors. Democratic process and an aggressive foreign policy were as incompatible in the mid-nineteenth century as in the twentieth, as congressional critics frequently noted. In late 1846, for example, Whig Garrett Davis pointed out that the founding fathers had "entrusted to the president the national shield," but they had intentionally given the national sword and "the entire war power" to Congress. "To make war is the most fearful power exerted by human government," Davis warned, a power too momentous to be placed in any one man's hands. 16 That admonition was out of fashion for two decades after World War II, but Vietnam gave it new meaning. In the 1840s and in the 1960s, Congress was remiss in its responsibility to scrutinize how American military power was used, for what purposes, and under what pretenses. In both cases a scheming president misled Congress into sanctioning a wider war.

than anticipated. Though Congress does delay while it deliberates, there are also drawbacks in granting the president the nation’s sword as well as its shield: the skirmish on the Rio Grande, the attack in the Gulf of Tonkin, and, more recently, the meddling in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Lebanon attest to that.  

Orthodox historical “truths” possess considerable resiliency. By extolling the virtues and achievements of a self-conscious people, they appeal to nationalistic feeling, and through constant repetition they acquire an aura of unquestioned certainty over time. The idealism of westward expansion embodied in the concept of manifest destiny persists because it helps to reconcile American imperialism with an extremely favorable national image. The assumed benevolence and the supposedly accidental nature of American expansion are convenient evasions of the complexities of the past. In accepting the rhetoric of American mission and destiny, apologists for the expansionists of the 1840s have had to minimize or ignore much historical evidence. Perhaps more to the point, defenders of American exceptionalism and innocence have actually had to slight other crucial motives for expansion that the Democrats themselves often candidly admitted.

Though the phrase manifest destiny appears repeatedly in the literature of American foreign relations, it does not accurately describe the expansionism of the 1840s. It is one of many euphemisms that have allowed several generations of Americans to maintain an unwarranted complacency in regard to their nation’s past, a complacency that has contributed in a fundamental way to the persistent quandary the United States has faced in trying to define a realistic role for itself in a world that seldom acts according to American precepts. Geographical isolation and a powerful exceptionalist ideology have insulated the United States from the complexities of culture and historical experience affecting other peoples, leaving Americans susceptible to myths and misconceptions at home and abroad. Often unaware of their own history, Americans frequently misunderstand foreign cultures and experiences as well. Myths and misconceptions often fill the void created by ignorance of history.

The expansionists of the 1840s should not be permitted to expro-

17. The ill-defined and untenable United States military mission in Lebanon, so strenuously supported by the Reagan administration, is a striking example of the way in which American policy makers frequently miscalculate how much can be lost and how little gained by committing United States military power abroad. Americans apparently cannot understand that military intervention by a major power sometimes provokes rather than deters aggression.
priate many of the best Americans ideals for their own purposes. Just as they manipulated the Census of 1840, the Democratic convention of 1844, and the Mexican-Texas border dispute for their own ends, so too did they exploit American exceptionalist ideology to ennoble their ambitions for riches and dominion. But rhetoric could not hide the chauvinism, aggressiveness, and design that were essential components of continental expansion. The United States used many tactics to expand its domain, and like other empires it created legitimizing myths to sanction that expansion. Some Americans, however, challenged the validity of those myths and condemned the conduct they excused. But critics of national policy seldom reach generations other than their own, for history—especially American history—often records only the dominant voices of the past. That the United States has changed dramatically since attaining its continental empire is obvious. That the American people have reassessed their basic assumptions about themselves, their national experience, and their approach to other nations is not so obvious.

Since impressions about the past affect consciousness in the present and help define possibilities for the future, the way in which historical events are interpreted significantly influences the ongoing process of defining national identity, national character, and national purpose. Because history involves both continuity and change over time, a historical work serves two crucial purposes: it provides a window to the past, and it furnishes a mirror to the present. However striking the changes in American life since the Jacksonian era, the persistence of certain principles and biases—the consistency of much of American political and diplomatic “culture” over several generations—ties the present to the past, and links both to the future. For that reason the legacy of the 1840s should be of concern to all Americans—not just historians.
MANIFEST DESIGN

Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America

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